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# The Group Needs Model

## A New Tool for Creating Extraordinary Groups

By Geoffrey M. Bellman  
and Kathleen D. Ryan

To an OD practitioner, groups are so basic to what we do and how we do it that it's tempting to take them for granted. Yet, think of the hours, days, and years we have spent thinking about and working with groups—sometimes with great frustration, occasionally with great elation. If you are like the two of us, you are occasionally fortunate enough to be involved with a fantastic group, one that seems almost magical, that inspires words such as *amazing* or *transforming*. When blessed with such an experience, who among us has not wondered, ‘What was so different about this amazing group? What allowed this collection of people to work together so well and achieve so much? How can I help create more powerful experiences more often for more people?’ In 2006, the two of us took on these questions directly.

Three years of study built our confidence that any member, leader, or facilitator can increase the likelihood that their group will be extraordinary. For us, an *extraordinary group* achieves outstanding results and as an outcome members, individually or collectively, experience a profound shift in how they see their world. We now see that groups that use words such as *amazing*, *magical*, *fantastic*, or *profound* are often transformational for those involved. In that transformation, a fundamental shift in individual perceptions occurs that accelerates behavior change and personal vitality. Things are never quite the same again. The measured tones of most organizations do not include the superlatives needed to describe what happened in this extraordinary group with these people.

This group success and this group behavior can be better understood when looking through a new lens. Rather than focusing on what group members do, we suggest diving below those behaviors into why people do what they do when they achieve with such extraordinary results. This article explains the field study that led to our “new lens.” It then describes the lens itself—the Group Needs Model—and illustrates it with three stories. The article closes with seven suggested applications of the model to OD consulting.

### Field Study

What better place to learn about great group success than from people who have experienced it? We interviewed people from sixty extraordinary small (2-20 members) groups. We talked with organizational leaders, information technology professionals, motorcyclists, high school teachers, high school students, soldiers, trainers, human resource officers, community college counselors, nurses, basketball coaches, community activists, soccer players, government contractors, white water rafters, board members, and small business owners. We hypothesized that these diverse extraordinary groups have much in common in how and why they perform as they do. Our field study confirmed our hypothesis—at least among the members of the sixty groups we spoke with. That work, our own consulting experience, and the work of others (see “Resources”) shaped the model central to our work and this article.

From the beginning of our field study,

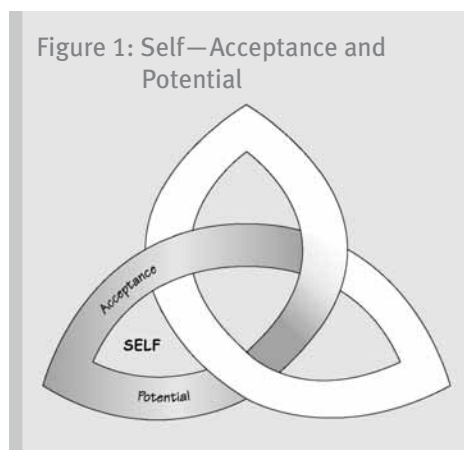
we knew we wanted to get beneath many of the methods and theories that have shaped the practice of organization development. We wanted to find the sub-structure upon which rest OD's familiar elements of group dynamics, meeting management, team development, group leadership, and facilitation. In the end, we identified six underlying human needs that we believe each of us brings to any group and that, if fulfilled, will enable transformational group output.

### The Group Needs Model

As human beings, we have been grouping for hundreds of thousands of years. We have evolved interdependently and survived as a species by facing the future together. Here in the 21st century, we each come to groups with a set of mostly unarticulated ancient and instinctive needs that we long to meet through a group experience—whether we know it or not. Groups are central to who we are as human beings; we define ourselves and meet our needs within them. The Group Needs Model presents six needs in three pairs:

- » **Self:** Acceptance of self while developing one's **Potential**
- » **Group:** A **Bond** with others that grows while pursuing a common **Purpose**
- » **World:** Understanding the **Reality** of the world while making an **Impact**

We begin our description of the Group Needs Model with what we think of as the Self loop (Figure 1).



The two sides of the Self loop express our need to accept ourselves and our need to reach toward who we could become. Here's a definition of each need.

- » **Acceptance:** Knowing and accepting ourselves for who we are.
- » **Potential:** Sensing and growing into our fuller and better selves.

As we accept ourselves, we become more confident in whatever surroundings we find ourselves. The sense that we can be

team. For six months, these four along with outside suppliers developed the course and broke new ground for the company. Their course received rave reviews, the value of computer-based-training was established, and a model was set for how the company would partner with outside vendors for other courses in the future.

Bruce linked this highly successful project to the particular dynamics on his team. "Everyone had a passion for doing things right and was inspired by the goal

**As we accept ourselves, we become more confident in whatever surroundings we find ourselves. The sense that we can be who we really are reduces inner anxiety and allows us to operate from a more centered stance. At the same time, we know we could be more. We lean toward our potential selves; we see that growth as our opportunity. Our interviews were full of examples of the interplay of Acceptance and Potential. An example is Bruce discovering OD and a new future.**

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#### A New Project Leads to a New Career.

In the 1990s Bruce was working quite contentedly—by himself—developing technical training courses in a manufacturing company. A new assignment changed all that. One of the unions asked his company for a course on basic electronics, fully utilizing computer technology. At that time computer-based-training was not widely understood or used. Bruce and three others assessed the request and recommended that the project move ahead. They then morphed into the implementation

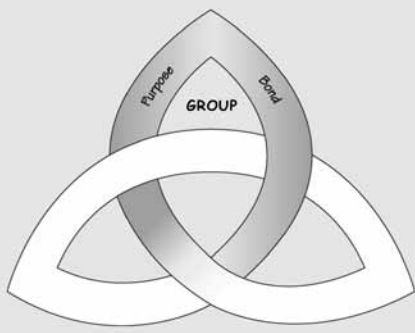
of building a high-quality product for the union," he said. "We'd get into heated discussions about even trivial things. In the end though, we were better off because of it."

Looking back on the experience and what he had learned about himself, Bruce demonstrates notable self-Acceptance: "I'm not a perfect team member. I have strong opinions and am sometimes inflexible. I'm not always right and I need to seek out other viewpoints. I learned to value other views and listen to them much better than before." This project led to another project and Bruce saw his Potential. He got seriously interested in groups and what makes them work. "I started seeking out opportunities to work with teams on more projects and eventually made my way into doing full time organization development work for the company." Bruce's initial team project required him to stretch and in doing so, he dramatically increased his self-awareness.

And he discovered the world of groups. Self-Acceptance combined with Potential launched him into new behaviors, new roles, and a new professional path.

The paired needs of Acceptance and Potential are part of our individual makeup, but we meet those needs through the groups to which we belong. We use others to gauge who we are and who we are becoming; we match their reactions to us with how we see ourselves. Though we experience the needs within ourselves, those needs play out in each group to which we belong. Joining a new group, we bring our current levels of self Acceptance and Potential with us, and that affects how we interact. In the group, we bring our individual needs to others and find two more needs that inevitably come up in a group setting. This brings us to the Group loop of our model (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Group—Bond and Purpose



Groups give considerable attention to meeting individual and collective needs for a Bond and a Purpose. Within the Group loop of our model, Purpose and Bond are the primary forces shaping the interaction within the group. Those needs are defined here:

- » Bond: The connections among us that create a shared sense of identity and belonging.
- » Purpose: The reason why we come together.

Members show up hoping for a group to meet their needs to connect with others in a meaningful way. The group offers the possibility of a home—a safe place to be

known, accepted, respected, and valued by others: a place to contribute and discover. This intangible sense of “being on the same team”—of belonging—is what Bond is about. As bonded members join to pursue a common Purpose, they commit to

Purpose as “a magnetic pull that brings us all together.” When asked if she had been changed by the experience, she responded with a resounding “Absolutely! I now spend twenty hours a week as a volunteer, have an incredible network of friends, and my

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something larger than themselves and their connection with one another. Through Purpose, they focus their attention, energy, skills, and communication—all within the context of a common compelling and unifying cause. Consider Allan and Sydney’s experience as follows.

#### **An International Donor’s Circle.**

Allan sums up his group experience in this way: “This is the highest performing team I’ve ever worked with.” Seven years ago, Allan was one of a small group that formed a donor’s circle focused on small international development projects. Members contributed \$2,500 or \$1,000 annually; they solicited proposals; recommended grantees; and monitor the progress of the projects they fund. In 2002, they began with six members who granted \$16,000 to three projects in one region of the world. At the end of 2008, there were forty-seven members funding twenty proposals amounting to \$103,000 in three regions. Their contributions since 2002 exceeded \$250,000.

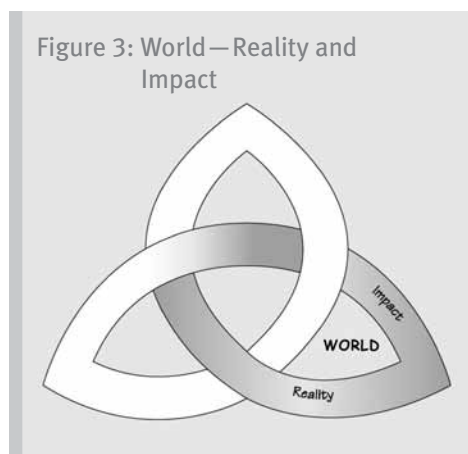
Sydney, a former scientist, joined the circle in 2006; she eventually became the Education Chairperson and Vice-President of the Board. She saw the circle’s

world view has expanded immeasurably.”

The clear and powerful Purpose of this group creates the framework in which decisions are made relatively easily, usually by consensus. A diverse membership includes strong and confident personalities, various ages and professional backgrounds, some who are wealthy, others who are not. Their meetings are “lively, with candor, and some joking and teasing.” Potluck meals and annual trips to remote parts of the world build connections among members.

Allan reflected the group’s Bond and Purpose saying, “There is great pride in what we are doing—that this is important and successful work. This bonds us.” He went on to say that, “Bond comes from the trust and respect that allows you to be yourself and be candid with others. This is a very important part of the caring that goes on between people and what makes it possible to say things that feel risky.” When conflicts occur, “we communicate our way through to the other side.” All members were drawn to the group’s compelling Purpose; this made it possible for them to “work things out and find a respectful compromise.” Bond and Purpose reinforce one another and in doing so also made space for members to meet their self-oriented

needs for Acceptance and Potential. All this set the stage for making a difference in the world, which takes us to our last loop (Figure 3).



The World loop refers to the larger world that is most relevant to a group, which can vary greatly in size, for example a corporation, a neighborhood committee, a cross-functional team, or an extended family. Whatever it is, a group needs to understand its world context to survive in and affect it. Two primary needs relate:

- » Reality: Understanding and accepting the world as it is and how it affects us.
- » Impact: Our intention to make a difference and our readiness to act.

Understanding our surrounding Reality is essential to our survival. Accepting our world means acknowledging it, working with it—even when we want to change it. We ignore the Reality of our world at our peril. Impact is about changing the world; it's about a group joining to move its world a notch toward what members think it should be. Understanding and accepting the world informs a group's strategies and broadens the possibilities for impact. Bob's story illustrates these two Group Needs.

#### Saving \$8.8 Million.

Bob's employer manufactured, sold, and repaired sophisticated measurement instruments in the US and overseas. In 2004, he faced an uncomfortable Reality: Cost reductions and moving from being a highly respected manufacturing man-

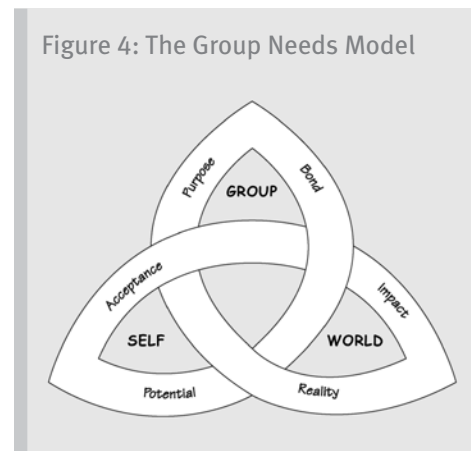
ager to an individual contributor. He was assigned to join a loose collection of individuals, each charged with producing cost savings. Eventually these six people came together as a self-organized group and became known as the Outsourcing Team. Bob's new co-workers included three engineers, a purchasing expert, and a finance person.

Their Reality had many challenging aspects: they had no sponsor at the next-level of the organization; initially group members didn't know each other; they had no plan to achieve the savings they wanted; factories were fearful because of past layoffs; and this was a world-wide organization. Added up, this posed an impressive set of challenges.

The Outsourcing Team gathered for a one day off-site. Bob recalled that by that time, the team "had a pretty clear understanding of our purpose and the complex reality we were operating in. We set about learning each others' expertise and style and realized we really needed each other's help." They defined how they would work together, with each member taking a unique role based on his expertise. Their collaborative plan was based on their shared assessment of Reality. Each team member worked on his unique role and the whole team worked in concert. Collectively facing their challenges pulled the team together.

And their Impact was impressive. They set about saving \$2 million in 2004;

savings came to \$8.8 million. Bob valued the intangible Impact of the team's work as well. "At the start, there was no sense of 'we.'" But as the work evolved, "It was an amazing experience. It was an opportunity to solve a problem, to do something others thought was too hard to do!" Long an advocate of teamwork, he learned first hand on a very difficult project that "this stuff really works!"



Now we overlap all the loops and needs in the Group Needs Model (Figure 4) because each of these six needs can interact with the other five. And, the more they interact, the more likely it is that an extraordinary group will be created. Bob's Outsourcing Team shows how the six Group Needs can be met in one experience: Without an understanding of the challenges (Reality) they faced, the

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they saved \$2.3 million. The next year, they saved an additional \$2.5 million, won the company's Innovation Award, and Bob was made manager of the group. By 2006, total

Outsourcing Team could not have made such a huge difference in their company (Impact). Self-confident (Acceptance) and motivated individuals (Potential) brought

their complementary talents to their common goal (Purpose). They attended to how they worked together and supported each other's success (Bond), reinforcing their ability to deliver tangible financial Impact. Equally notable is the intangible Impact. For Bob, teaming was no longer a management notion, but an internalized perspective on group work. And, at least four of the group members expanded their skills in team building, influencing, or organizing in ways that prepared them for future roles in the company.

Another point: As powerful as tangible results might be out there in the world, the larger power of extraordinary groups is their transformative effect on individuals. People we interviewed regularly stated that their group experience changed who they were and how they saw the world. This shift in perception may or may not be visible, but to the individuals affected it is huge. And when this shift happens, people are more receptive to changing their behavior; they feel more alive in their group work; they feel more committed to the organizations or structures that support their group experiences; and they are motivated to bring their best to the work at hand. Thus the personal impacts benefit the organization greatly.

You may see the Outsourcing Team as both lucky and rare. Our field study suggests otherwise. We had no difficulty finding people aged 17 to 70 who have been part of at least one extraordinary group experience. In each of the sixty stories we heard, people readily recalled how wonderful, amazing, or extraordinary their experience had been. And in each case, at least three of the six Group Needs were met; ninety percent of the time, five or six needs were met. We now believe that these almost magical groups are widely experienced, but seldom studied or understood.

### **Taking Action Using the Group Needs Model**

As OD consultants, we often focus on the dynamics within the group—the more and less effective behaviors that affect group success. What if this focus is on symptoms,

rather than causes? What if we didn't look at behavior as much as at the motives, drives, and needs that underlie behavior? What if extraordinariness flows more from meeting needs than from constructive group behavior? Consider the options opened by seeing groups through the lens of the individual needs held within the group, through the six Group Needs Model.

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How can we in OD help extraordinary groups happen more often? We suggest that looking through the Group Needs Model affects how we design group experiences, facilitate groups, and coach group members and leaders. What follows are a few ideas to help you imagine how you might design, coach, or facilitate to enhance the meeting of the six Group Needs.

#### **Reflect On Your Own Group Experience.**

In what groups are you a member? In what groups do you find yourself a designated leader or facilitator? Where, in your life, do these groups show up—at work, in the community, with friends or family? Analyze your own group experiences, especially ones that stand out as extraordinary. How did these experiences affect you? How did they affect others? As you think back, did the Six Group Needs show up and how were the six Group Needs met?

#### **Observe a Group.**

Based on this article, create a check list that contains the definitions of the six Group Needs. Take this list to your next group meeting. Make a point of seeing the group through the lens of those six needs. Note what people say and do in relation to the needs. Which needs seem to prevail? Notice how directly people express their

needs. Or not. Notice needs frustrated and needs met, and the consequence of each. Use all of this to educate yourself on the use of the needs and the model. Notice how it is useful to you, how it leads you to make different observations than you might have made earlier.

#### **Reflect On a Group You Recently Facilitated.**

Consider involving others in thinking about a recent meeting you facilitated. Present the six needs to the group and explain them. Then ask the group to look at itself and the needs as they played out in that recent meeting. Ask for feedback on how your facilitation helped to meet—or frustrate—the meeting of certain needs. Discuss what you learned from this meeting that could positively affect your next meeting. How could you go about seeing that more Group Needs are met more often?



### Engage a Client with the Group Needs Model.

Ask your client to read this article; express your desire to use the Group Needs Model in an upcoming meeting. Before the meeting, talk with the client about the article, its main elements, and how you might use it together. Agree on some few elements of the model that you want to emphasize and how those choices might influence each of your roles at the meeting.

### Identify a Need and Meet It.

Based on earlier observations of a group, select one need that you think would be useful to meet the next time the group gathers. Before members meet, develop a number of alternative questions you might ask and actions you might take—all related to the specific need. Draw on those ideas while you are with the group and note the effect. How did your input affect the group direction? How did you affect group engagement? Were new options opened? Afterwards, decide what you want to do next time.

### Reinforce Acceptance and Potential in Individuals.

Acceptance and Potential are the most personal of the six Group Needs; use them to attend to individuals in the group. Offer observations or ask questions that touch on members' individual strengths and possibilities. Notice the impact as you reinforce an individual's current and potential value. Notice how this person responds to you, and how what you said seems to affect how he or she behaves toward you and within the group.

### Comment on Group Needs Being Met.

Employ the more traditional processing role that we OD people are used to and ask questions about or make observations of the group that are directly tied to dynamics of the Group Needs Model and each of the six needs: Acceptance, Potential, Bond, Purpose, Reality, and Impact.

We two have each been engaged in OD for decades. This Group Needs Model has opened realities and possibilities we had not previously experienced. The world we live in right now needs the best from all of us to solve enormous problems and take advantage of untold opportunities. Groups of two to twenty are a powerful way in which to do so. And, as OD practitioners, we are well positioned to actively support their contribution.

### Resources

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- The Collective Wisdom Initiative. <http://www.collectivewisdominitiative.org> A fascinating site for deeper and alternative explorations of group wisdom.
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Geoffrey M. Bellman and Kathleen D. Ryan have recently co-authored *Extraordinary Groups: How Ordinary Teams Achieve Amazing Results* (Jossey-Bass, 2009). Both are founding members of the Community Consulting Partnership ([www.ccpseattle.org](http://www.ccpseattle.org)). They can both be reached at [www.extraordinarygroups.com](http://www.extraordinarygroups.com). Geoff has worked with large organizations forty years, fourteen as an internal consultant and manager, twenty-six as an external consultant. His work has focused on renewing large, mature organizations. Kathleen has practiced organization development since 1984 and has been identified as “an organizational consultant with an instinct for translating complex human behavior into practical concepts.” Her work focuses on executive coaching and onboarding and culture change. She serves on the Board of Directors for Seattle University’s Master’s degree program in Organization Design and Renewal.

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